

# **The Chinese Notions of Harmony,**

**With special focus on implications for Cross Cultural and Global Psychology**

**Louise Sundararajan**

## Introduction

The Chinese term for harmony is “*he*” or “*ho*” which is derived from terms for musical instruments and the cooking cauldron, as Lu (2004) puts it, “the notion of harmony is intimately connected with the beauty of music and flavors” (p. 218). A statement in the *Tso Chuan*, attributed to Zen Tsu (died 493 B.C.), stated that “Harmony is like soup. There being water and heat, sour flavoring and pickles, salt and peaches, with a bright fire of wood, the cook harmonizing all the ingredients in the cooking of the fish and flesh” (Fung, 1962, p. 107). In reference to music, it is said in another classical text, the *Book of Documents*: “poetry puts into words what we have in our hearts; song prolongs those words into chants; and the notes that follow the chant are put into harmony with the scales. When the eight instruments are in good accord [as they play these chants] and do not encroach upon one another, then the spirits and man will be brought into harmony” (Holzman, 1978, p. 23).

My investigation on harmony is divided into three sections. The first section examines the attributes of harmony as conventionally understood in the Chinese classical texts. The second section casts harmony in a modern theoretical framework, that of symmetry breaking and its restoration. The third and last section explores the potential contributions of harmony to cross cultural and global psychology.

## Attributes of Harmony

According to Chinese classical texts, harmony is a phenomenon with the following attributes:

### Harmony is an emergent order

The harmony that arises from cooking and music is not a static, pre-given state, any more than the cake exists before baking. Rather, harmony resides in a reality that is to be created each and every time—to paraphrase Scheibe (2000), every performance is the first performance in music and cooking (see also Sundararajan, 2002).

### Harmony is not uniformity

Harmony is a relational term which entails diversity and difference. The Master said, “Exemplary persons seek harmony not sameness; petty persons, then, are the opposite” (Analects, 13/23, in Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 169). Lu (2004) explains that the gentleman can be in a harmonious relationship with the world without losing his individuality, whereas the petty person simply follows the crowd (p. 182). The importance given to individuality in harmony suggests a unique part and whole relationship, in which “the individual is not eliminated by the whole, this marks the difference between harmony and sameness” (Lu, 2004, p. 143).

As Confucius pointed out, harmony is not simply blending in socially. This point can be further clarified by a distinction between blending and particulate systems. According to Bolender (2011), novelty in a blending system is an averaging of inputs, such that repeated blending results in greater uniformity. For instance, blending black and white results in gray, with more blending leading to a homogeneity that renders

everything gray cats in the darkness of the night. By contrast, combination in a particulate system tends to result in greater variety, as will be elaborated later. For now it suffices to keep in mind that harmony is a particulate system, not a blending system.

#### Harmony is a holistic perception

Harmony entails a holistic perception, an overall sense of things rather than focusing on any particular thing (Lu, 2004). The overall sense of things is an abstraction over multiple aspects of information (Frijda and Sundararajan, 2007). This suggests a complexity in structure that again sets apart harmony and uniformity. Uniformity entails the simple structure of an atomic whole that has no parts, or a unilateral relationship that subsumes the parts under the whole, resulting in a univocal system. Harmony in contrast is a complex system of multiple constituents, which give rise to an emergent order of the whole.

#### Harmony is a dynamic equilibrium

One of the most insightful formulations of harmony is found in *The Doctrine of the Mean* (1971):

While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of EQUILIBRIUM. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of HARMONY. (p. 384, emphasis in the original)

Here the term harmony is used as the synonym of equilibrium, with the difference being that it is the equilibrium in a post-perturbation state. In the words of Fung (1962): “To

have the emotions welling up and yet in due proportion is also a state of the mean [equilibrium]” (p. 107). To be differentiated from the original, pre-perturbation equilibrium, harmony is known as dynamic equilibrium. This formulation of harmony has anticipated the notion of symmetry breaking in modern science.

#### Harmony in the context of Symmetry Breaking

In modern science, the technical term for equilibrium is symmetry, which may be defined as a structure in which transformations make no relevant difference (Zee, 1986). For instance,  $a=b$ , in which case  $b=a$ . A perfectly round disk has symmetry, since it will look the same after a rotation. Consider an example of symmetry in nature given by the physicist Frank Close (2000): “Imagine the surface of a huge lake . . . there is not a breath of wind and the surface is perfectly smooth. Move a hundred meters in any direction and the lake looks exactly the same” (p. 15). Often compared to still water in Taoist texts, the pre-perturbation state of the mind, referred to as equilibrium in the above quotation from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, is another example of symmetry, in which homogeneity and sameness loom large.

Loss of symmetry is known as symmetry breaking (Close, 2000). A case in point is ripples on a pond. Initially, the pond has a high degree of symmetry, as every part of the pond is identical to every other part, whereas the pond surface with ripples has less symmetry. Likewise, the mind stirred by emotions has less symmetry. The story of symmetry breaking told by *The Doctrine of the Mean* goes something like this: The original symmetry, referred to as equilibrium, is characteristic of the pre-perturbation state of the mind. Emotional episodes result in symmetry breaking. Successful symmetry restoration is referred to as harmony. As such, harmony is not the original but

the second, restored symmetry/equilibrium. Let us pause to ponder on this important point.

One phrase from the above quotation from *The Doctrine of the Mean* bears repetition: “When those feelings have been stirred. . .” (1971, p. 384). This signifies an acceptance of the perturbation, and an optimism that symmetry/equilibrium can nevertheless be established in the post perturbation state. The statement of Fung is also worth repeating: “To have the emotions welling up and yet in due proportion is also a state of the mean [equilibrium]” (1962, p. 107).

### Spontaneous Symmetry Breaking

Symmetry breaking is not confined to emotional episodes. Its ubiquity is conveyed by the term “spontaneous symmetry breaking” (Bolender, 2010), a process which, according to modern physics, lies at the very origin of life, the most familiar account of which is the Big Bang. The Chinese version of spontaneous symmetry breaking is found in the *Dao de jing* (Ch. 42): “The Dao begets the One; the One begets two; two beget three; and three beget the myriad things” (Lynn, 1999, p. 135). Similar to the modern account of the Big Bang, the *Dao de jing* tells the story of symmetry breaking on a cosmic scale--in the words of the authoritative commentary by Wang Bi (226-249 AD): “The numbers involved in the transition from nothingness to existence are all accounted for here” (Lynn, 1999, p. 135). Lynn (1999) explains: “Somethingness always involves differentiation. In nature, the differentiation of all the myriad things and all the myriad phenomena occurs spontaneously and without conscious design” (p. 18, emphasis added). Cast in the framework of symmetry breaking, we may say that the Tao as

Nothingness is the symmetry that pre-dates the Somethingness or existence characterized by spontaneous symmetry breaking (One begets two; two beget three, and so on).

Since loss of oneness, with subsequent diversity and difference, are the consequences of spontaneous symmetry breaking, strategies for symmetry restoration can be expected to vary according to both the different approaches to difference, and the varying degrees of nostalgia toward the original oneness/unity. The strategy favored by the notion of harmony is not to eliminate differences, but rather to accept and work with them. Thus *Dao de jing* goes on to say: “The myriad things, bearing yin and embracing yang, form a unified harmony through the fusing of these vital forces” (Lynn, 1999, p. 135). Note that the thrust here is not to retrieve the original equilibrium of Nothingness, nor of oneness, but to find harmony in diversity and differences, symbolized by the yin and yang duality. This unique approach to symmetry restoration consists of two components: the both-and logic, and the principle of complementarity.

#### The logic of both-and

Harmony operates on the logic of both-and rather than either/or—the former is inclusive whereas the latter exclusive in relation to differences (Fang, 2010; Li, 2011). This point can be illustrated by the statement of Zen Tsu that “The salt flavoring is the other to the bitter, and the bitter is the other to the salt. With these two ‘others’ combining in due proportions and a new flavor emerging, this is what is expressed in ‘harmony’ . . .” (Fung, 1962, p. 108). Difference, referred to as the “other” in the above quote, is not to be eliminated but rather included and duly combined.

#### The principle of complementarity

The both-and logic goes hand in hand with the principle of complementarity (Peng and Nisbett, 1999), which states that differences can be beneficial by serving as the needed antipode and complement for each other. In terms of its mechanisms of operation, this principle is known as the yin-yang balance (Fang, 2010; Li, 2011). The yin and yang balance is a mechanism with two major manifestations--possibly corresponding to the so far not well understood adaptive balance between excitatory and inhibitory processing in the brain (Williams, 2010, p. 5) --mutual enhancement and mutual inhibition among competing cues.

*Mutual activation and enhancement*

The mutual enhancement between differences plays a large role in music. It is stated in the *Tso Chuan* that “There are the distinctions between clear and turbid, small and great. . . plaintive and joyous. . . all of which augment each other” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 255). The notion of complementarity presupposes diversity and difference. It is not surprising, therefore, to find in the ancient texts an association of diversity with growth, and conversely, uniformity with un-productivity. In the *Kuo Yü*, Shih Po is quoted as saying, “To ameliorate one thing with another is the meaning of harmony. The result is flourishing and growth, and thereby creatures coming into existence. But supposing uniformity is supplemented by uniformity, nothing new can be produced” (Fung, 1962, p. 107).

*Mutual inhibition and constraint*

The combination of differences may be out of proportion or of due proportion. Due proportion is essential to music, as the *Book of Documents* (II, 1/5) puts it: “When the eight instruments [of music] are in good accord, and do not encroach upon one

another, then the spirits and man will be brought into harmony” (Holzman, 1978, p. 23, emphasis added). Otherwise, when the combination of things is out of proportion, the strong will overwhelm the weak, resulting in lose of harmony.

How to achieve and maintain due proportion of things in the mix of differences? There are two possible routes to this goal: One is to increase control, for instance to streamline things by the suppression or avoidance of differences. Another, somewhat counter intuitive approach, favored by the yin-yang balance, is to increase diversity. The essential insight of the yin-yang balance is that due proportion of things is the result, not of external control, but of the inherent capacity of the system to regulate itself through the mutual inhibition and restraint between competing cues. This insight is supported by the studies of Köpetz, Faber, Fishbach, and Kruglanski (2011), who found that the simultaneous activation of multiple goals *restricted* the set of acceptable means to ones that benefited the entire set of active goals. This non-suppressive and non-avoidant regulation strategy can best be understood in terms of cognition without control.

#### Yin yang balance as cognition without control

According to Thompson-Schill, Ramscar, and Chrysikou (2009), not all mental tasks require cognitive control—some capitalize on cognition without control. Tasks that capitalize on cognitive control are performance tasks which require focused attention to filter out task-irrelevant information, and selectively maintain task-relevant information. By contrast, learning and creativity require cognition without control, since these tasks capitalize on holistic, de-focused attention (Sundararajan, 2004) which facilitates competition between multiple cues. The authors claim that the competitive process --or what the Chinese refer to as the yin-yang balance --among multiple cues in learning and

creativity can be interfered with by cognitive control, and facilitated by the absence of the same.

Cognition with and without control can be illustrated by two different approaches to cooking—recipe versus harmony. The difference between these two approaches may be explored along the two components of cooking: (a) external regulation and (b) internal process—the former refers to what the cook does; the latter, transformation of the food stuff in the cooking process. In the recipe approach, characteristic of cognitive control, (a) directly controls (b) such that emphasis is placed entirely upon (a), which attempts to get the cooking process down to a science by specifying with precision the ingredients, the proportion, and the exact sequence of action. By contrast, in the harmony approach, cooking is considered a “subtle art.” The *Lushi chunqiu* puts it this way:

In combining your ingredients to achieve a harmony, you have to use the sweet, sour, bitter, acrid, and the salty, and you have to mix them in an appropriate sequence and proportion. Bringing the various ingredients together is an extremely subtle art in which each of them has its own expression. The variations within the cooking pot are so delicate and subtle that they cannot be captured in words or fairly conceptualized. (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, pp. 257-258, emphasis added).

Approaching cooking as a creative task, rather than a recipe-based performance, the above passage evinced a clear demarcation of two processes, (a) and (b)—the former refers to the cook combining ingredients, paying attention to sequence and proportion;

the latter to the “delicate and subtle” process in the cooking pot. The emphatic distinction drawn in the above quote between the two—(a) can be formulated into instructions or recipes, whereas (b) defies conceptualization—makes it clear that the former does not directly control, so much as facilitate, the latter. This trust in the process of things, which supposedly lies beyond language and conceptualization, is a good example of cognition without control.

The key to harmony, from this perspective, lies in the internal process (b), in which the competition among multiple constituents-- suggested by the “various ingredients” each having “its own expression”—is what makes possible their mutual inhibition and restraint that result in the overall harmony of taste (for further elaboration, see Frijda and Sundararajan, 2007; Sundararajan, 2004). Thus in the harmony framework, the role of the expert system (a), be it the cook or cognition, is to facilitate the process of cooking (b), rather than to micromanage it the way cookbooks do.

### Reprise

The Chinese notion of harmony can best be understood in the framework of symmetry breaking and its restoration. In the mythical beginning was unity or equilibrium, otherwise known as the Tao, which, through spontaneous symmetry breaking, gave rise to differences. Symmetry restoration takes many forms, depending on one’s approach to diversity and difference. Privileging unity or uniformity may entail a rejection of differences to find one’s way back to the original symmetry. The notion of harmony, by contrast, accepts differences and works within their parameters to achieve a second symmetry, rather than returning to the original one. In contrast to the original symmetry or equilibrium, in which uniformity and homogeneity loom large, harmony as

dynamic equilibrium gives importance to diversity and differences. Whereas the original symmetry is an order of reality that is predicated upon the absence of difference, harmony as second symmetry is an emergent order that is contingent upon the shifting balance within the mix of differences. Notions of unity that aspire to return to the original symmetry can be represented by the metaphor of the melting pot, in which the whole abrogates the parts, whereas harmony is akin to toss salad or stir fry (Sundararajan, 2010), in which the success, i.e., flavorfulness, of the whole depends upon the extent to which each ingredients “having its own expression” as *Lushi chungiu* (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, pp. 257-258) put it.

In sum, the original and secondary symmetries, corresponding to uniformity and harmony respectively, differ in the mechanisms of symmetry restoration. These differences seem to fall along the divide between two types of logic—either/or versus both-and—which in turn seem to correspond to two types of executive functioning—cognition with versus without control. Cognitive control uses the either/or logic to filter out irrelevant information, to reduce diversity and improve on the reduction of ambiguity. Cognition without control, by contrast, uses the both-and, inclusive approach to information processing, an approach that capitalizes on the inherent self regulatory mechanisms of the system, referred to by the Chinese as the yin yang balance, to achieve harmony.

As an example of indigenous psychology, this investigation of the Chinese notion of harmony is consistent with the recommendation of Fiske (2002) that “We [Western psychology] must transcend our ethnocentric framework and not just study how other cultures differ from the United States but explore what they are intrinsically” (p. 87). But why is it important to approach a culture as it is intrinsically? The heuristic value of indigenous psychology (Kim, Yang, and Hwang, 2006) is demonstrated by the potential contributions of one cultural specific notion of harmony to psychology.

#### Potential contributions to cross cultural psychology

The notion of harmony as found in the cross cultural literature is defined along the lines of keeping the status quo, with particular emphasis on self-effacement as a means to maintain group “harmony” (Matsumoto, 1989, 1990). This suppression of individual differences for the sake of group “harmony” is consistent with regulation by cognitive control in contrast to the Chinese model of harmony that privileges cognition without control. This cognitive difference in suppression of individual differences can be understood in the context of individualistic versus collectivistic societies. According to Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002), collectivistic cultures are characterized by “the permanent bonds formed among similar others,” whereas individualistic cultures by “temporary relations formed in complex societies among dissimilar others” (p. 3, emphasis added). Dissimilar others, characteristic of the market place, are basically a collection of strangers, who have no intrinsic relationship with one another. Equilibrium among strangers depends therefore on the external control of rules, such as law and logic, in which the universal over-rides the particular, characteristic of top-down cognitive control. By contrast, similar others, characteristic of small villages, constitute an organic

system, in which equilibrium/harmony results from the internal regulation of the system, a regulatory process which is interfered with by cognitive control, but facilitated by cognition without control, as has been shown in the foregoing analysis. Thus in contrast to the Western notion of harmony which is maintained by suppressing individual differences, the harmony among similar others capitalizes on individual differences and their complex relationship of mutual complement and constraint, known as the yin yang balance.

In the final analysis, this investigation of the Chinese folk psychology of harmony suggests that the notion of harmony in the cross cultural literature is ethnocentric, and cannot be generalized beyond the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) (Henrich, et al., 2010) samples. The Chinese emphasis on the dialectic relationship between terms also challenges the either-or logic that holds sway in Western metaphysics, and calls into question the appropriateness of some measures in cross cultural studies. For instance, the use of forced choice items of independence versus interdependence (Markus, and Kitayama, 1991) on participants who perceive the tasks of life not in terms of a choice between two orders of reality--individual versus group interests, etc.--so much as affirming both realities, and negotiating for a viable relationship between the two (Fang, 2010).

#### Potential contributions to global psychology.

Global psychology has been a topic fraught with great expectations as well as suspicion. Whether global psychology is desirable or not depends on our models of unity. So far the prevalent model of unity in mainstream psychology is that of uniformity, an assumption bolstered by the “scientific” claims of psychic universals such as mind, brain,

basic emotions, and so on. Critics of psychic universals call our attention to the underlying epistemology of a sovereignty that abrogates cultural differences by rendering the latter icing on the biology cake. Resisting the unifying discourse of psychic universals is the counter movement that insists on the irreducible pluralism of cultures and minds. Since culture and mind make each other up, so the argument goes, there could be potentially as many minds as there are cultures (e.g., Shweder, 1990, 2000). On both horns of the dilemma between unity and diversity, psychology is pierced.

Enter the Chinese notions of harmony. Harmony offers an alternative model of unity, a unity that capitalizes on diversity, rather than suppressing it. Modeled on harmony as a second, post symmetry-breaking equilibrium, this potential unity is not a pre-existent reality but rather an emergent order contingent on the synergy of competing cues. Like flavors that arise from the cooking pot, the unity of a harmony-based global psychology entails a dynamic process capable of reaching a temporary truce among conflicting voices. To the extent that this emergent unity, no less than the excellence of the flavors, depends upon the ingredients of the mix *each having its own expression* as we read in the *Lushi chunqiu*, indigenous psychologies around the globe can make a major contribution to the making of a global psychology that capitalizes on the notion of unity-in-diversity (Li, 2011).

## References

- Ames, R. T. & Rosemont, H. Jr. (1998). *The Analects of Confucius/A philosophical translation*. New York: Ballantine.
- Bolender, J. (2010). *The self-organizing social mind*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- Bolender, J. (2011). *Digital social mind*. Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic.
- Close, F. (2000). *Lucifer's legacy: the meaning of asymmetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fang, T. (2010). Asian management research needs more self-confidence: Reflection on Hofstede (2007) and beyond. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 27, 155-170.
- Fiske, A. P. (2002). Using individualism and collectivism to compare cultures—a critique of the validity and measurement of the constructs: Comment on Oyserman et al. (2002). *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 78-88.
- Frijda, N. H. & Sundararajan, L. (2007). Emotion refinement: a theory inspired by Chinese poetics. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2, 227-241.
- Fung Yu-lan. (edited by Derk Bodde) (1966). *A short history of Chinese philosophy*. New York: The Free Press.
- Fung Yu-lan. (E. R. Hughes, trans.). (1962). *The spirit of Chinese philosophy*. Boston: Beacon.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., and Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, 61-83.
- Holzman, D. (1978). Confucian and ancient Chinese literary criticism. In A. A. Rickett (Ed.), *Chinese approaches to literature from Confucius to Liang Ch'i-ch'ao* (pp. 21-41). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kim, U., Yang, K.S., & Hwang, K.K. (Eds.) (2006) *Indigenous and Cultural Psychology: Understanding People in Context*. NY: Springer SBM Publications.
- Köpetz, C., Faber, T., Fishbach, A., and Kruglanski, A. W. (2011). The multifinality constraints effect: How goal multiplicity narrows the means set to a focal end.

- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 810-826.
- Li, P.P. (2011). Toward an Integrative framework of indigenous research/  
The geocentric implications of yin-yang balance. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, online publishing.
- Lu, R. R. (2004). *Zhung-guo gu-dai xiang-dui guan-xi si-wei tan-tao* (Investigations of the idea of relativity in ancient China). Taipei: Shang ding wen hua.
- Lynn, R. J. (1999). *The classic of the way and virtue*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Markus, H. R. & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98, 224-253.
- Matsumoto, D. (1989). Cultural influences on the perception of emotion. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 20, 92-105.
- Matsumoto, D. (1990). Cultural similarities and differences in display rules. *Motivation and Emotion*, 14, 195-214.
- Oyserman, D., Coon, H. M., & Kemmelmeier, M. (2002). Rethinking individualism and collectivism: Evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 3-72.
- Peng, K., & Nisbett, R. E. (1999). Culture, dialectics, and reasoning about contradiction. *American Psychologist*, 54, 741-754.
- Scheibe, K. E. (2000). *The drama of everyday life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Shweder, R. A. (2000). The psychology of practice and the practice of the three psychologies. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 3, 207-222.

- Shweder, R. A. (1990). Cultural Psychology - What Is it? In J. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, and G. Herdt, (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 1-43). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sundararajan, L. (2002). The veil and veracity of passion in Chinese poetics. *Consciousness & Emotion, 3*, 197–228.
- Sundararajan, L. (2004). Twenty-four poetic moods: Poetry and personality in Chinese aesthetics. *Creativity Research Journal, 16*, 201-214.
- Sundararajan, L. (2010). Two flavors of aesthetic tasting: *Rasa* and savoring/A cross cultural study with implications for psychology of emotion. *Review of General Psychology, 14*, 22-30.
- The Doctrine of the Mean (J. Legge, Trans.). (1971). In J. Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Vol. I* (pp. 382-434). Taipei: Wen Shih Chi. (translation first published 1893)
- Thompson-Schill, S. L., Ramscar, M., & Chrysikou, E. G. (2009). Congition without control: When a little frontal lobe goes a long way. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 18*, 259-263.
- Williams, J. M.G. (2010). Commentary/Mindfulness and psychological process. *Emotion, 10*, 1-7.
- Zee, A. (1986). *Fearful symmetry: The search for beauty in modern physics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.